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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TIRANA 000639

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/18/2019

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SUBJECT: IMAMI: THE ACCIDENTAL MINISTER?

Classified By: Ambassador John L. Withers for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (U) Summary. The announcement of Arben Imami, until now Prime Minister Berisha's chief of staff, as Albania's new Minister of Defense caught even Imami by surprise. Imami is a founding member of the Democratic Party (DP), although he was estranged from the party for a decade and reconciled with DP leader Berisha in 2003. Among other positions, Imami has previously served as Minister of Justice. In 1999, he conducted graduate studies at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. and is a strong supporter of U.S.-Albanian relations. A close confidant of Berisha, Imami has maintained ties to the opposition Socialist Party. He is known as a hard worker, a thoughtful politician, somewhat private, and sometimes a difficult negotiator. He will have to rely strongly on these traits in dealing with a ministry and military affairs in which he otherwise has no background. End Summary.

#### DEFMIN APPOINTMENT

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¶2. (C) After the DP won the June 28, 2009 national elections, several names swirled around as possible ministers of defense, none of them Imami. Media claimed that the two most likely candidates were DP parliamentarian from Durres Ferdinand Xhaferri or then-Minister of Transportation Sokol Olldashi. Several of Post's sources confirmed these two names. However, according to one source, on September 10, only hours before submitting the final list of ministers to the President for approval, Berisha went over the list one last time and began penciling in last-minute changes, including Minister of Defense.

¶3. (C) SP member Ben Blushi told Post that when he had had coffee with Imami June 27, they discussed possible ministry appointments and Imami gave no indication that he was being considered for any position. Allegedly, Imami himself learned of the appointment only when the decree became public.

#### EARLY POLITICAL LIFE

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¶4. (U) Imami was born January 21, 1958 in Tirana. He graduated in acting from the Albanian Fine Arts Academy in 1981 and went on to star in several communist-era movies. With the fall of communism in 1990-1, he left acting to enter politics as one of the seven founding members of the Democratic Party, the first opposition party in modern Albanian history. Imami's eventual estrangement from the party coincided with Sali Berisha's rise to leadership in the Qa@Q@QB Q QppQ In 1992, the year BerishABC Q QQPQ`QaQa`hEcQa/b2 fd pulled their candidates fpOipQa r!c\$& Hm`mi uAq one of the leaders of sq"s%quent macqsTrEat protests. Angry, Berisha derisively nickn!med Imami, "The General from the South." When the

protests were violently dispersed in late May, riot police assaulted Imami and with a blow to his face, knocked out all of his front teeth. (Note. Fellow protestor and national sports hero-turned-politician Agim Fagu is said to have joked with a convalescent Imami, "Cheer up! We are fighting for something far more important than a few teeth!" End note.)

¶5. (U) With the 1997 collapse of the DP government and the opposition Socialist Party's (SP) rise to power, Imami allied his DAP with the Socialists. As a result, Socialist Prime Minister Fatos Nano appointed Imami "Minister of Legislative Reform and Parliament Relations." In subsequent socialist governments led by various rival factions within the SP, Imami continued to win favor, becoming Minister of Justice under PM Ilir Meta, and then Minister of Local Governance and Decentralization under PM Pandeli Majko.

RETURN TO DP  
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¶6. (U) In 2003, Imami was enticed to be reconciled with a "reformed" Berisha and return to the right. When the governing board of the DP - still bitter over Imami's long opposition to the DP - refused Berisha's proposal that Imami be restored to DP membership, Berisha instead appointed Imami his chief of staff. When in 2005 the DP won national

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elections and Berisha was appointed Prime Minister, Imami followed Berisha and became his Chief of Cabinet, which position he held until last week. Imami has remained a close confidant to Berisha.

CHARACTER  
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¶7. (C) According to acquaintances, Imami is gracious and thoughtful, although not afraid to exert authority. He is known to be even-tempered and have a positive disposition overall, but can become difficult when under stress. Contacts in the MoD have already noted the difference in presence he brings compared to former DefMin Oketa, especially in his ability to convey authority. In general, he is very private and has been reserved about his private life. There are suspicions as to his motives for returning to the DP, but in general he enjoys a positive reputation. He is a strong advocate of close ties to the United States and will look to cooperate with the U.S. in continued defense reforms and demilitarization.

WITHERS